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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #36

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## **The Unbreakable, Golden Chain of Salvation**

### **Romans 8:28-30**

Churches and denominations throughout history have often argued and divided over a number of issues, such as: (1) the role of women in ministry leadership, (2) the timing of the rapture, be it before, during, or after the so-called tribulation, (3) water baptism: is it for infants of believing parents or only for those who have come to personal faith in Jesus Christ, and (4) the question of miraculous gifts of the Spirit: did they cease with the death of the apostles in the first century, or do they continue into the present day?

All of those have the potential to get Christians in trouble with other Christians. But none of these is the most divisive of all. The single most controversial question that Bible-believing Christians must address is the subject of divine election and predestination. In the thinking of many people, the doctrine of election or predestination is a primary reason why men and women are in hell. To others, such as myself, this doctrine is the only reason men and women are in heaven.

Beginning today, and extending through the ninth chapter of Romans, we come head-to-head with this controversy. And we will not avoid it. Not long ago I was watching a well-known TV preacher on Saturday night. I hadn't watched him before, so I take it as providential that I tuned in on this particular evening. He began his sermon by saying that he and his church had just concluded Romans 1-8. He then stated that he would be skipping altogether Romans 9-11! "Turn in your Bibles," he then said, "to Romans 12:1." To say I was stunned is an understatement. You will hear no such instruction from me!

### *A Hypothetical Story to Help Us Understand the Issue We Face*

Deep and complex theological issues are often made more intelligible by a simple, down-to-earth illustration. So let me begin our time in Romans 8-9 by putting real life flesh and bones to what strikes many as an abstract and divisive idea.

Jerry and Ed are identical twins, raised by loving, Christian parents. As much as was humanly possible, their mother and father refused to play favorites. Both boys were shown the same affection, granted the same privileges, and bore the same responsibilities in the home. They attended the same schools and were virtually equal in athletic ability, popularity among their peers, and grade point average. They were truly twins in temperament, personality, and achievement.

The boys attended church regularly with their parents but showed no interest in religious matters. They would often sit at the back of the church and laugh at the preacher, disdainful of his persistent appeal for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. As they were alike in so many other respects, they appeared to share an equal contempt for the gospel.

Jerry and Ed had just celebrated their nineteenth birthday and were looking forward to graduating from high school. It was Easter Sunday. They were sitting in the same chairs where they had for years, listening to the same pastor. But today, something was different. Nothing unusual, at least in terms of the mundane, natural affairs of life, had occurred to account for what happened on that morning. Neither brother had endured a humiliating experience at school, nor had they been the recipients of excessive praise and honor. By all appearances, it was just another Sunday morning.

But on this day, much to his own surprise, Jerry suddenly found himself listening intently to the sermon, while Ed was texting on his phone, obviously without interest in anything being said. Both brothers had heard countless sermons depicting their sinful and desperate spiritual condition, together with the promise of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Christ. But not until that Easter Sunday did either of them pay the slightest degree of attention. Ideas and doctrines that had, until then, sounded silly and archaic, mysteriously began to make sense to Jerry. The existence of an infinitely holy God against whom he had rebelled, together with the prospect of eternal death, shattered all remaining tranquility of soul. He glanced briefly at Ed to see if he were paying attention. Not a chance.

“He’s right,” Jerry silently concluded. “I *am* a sinner. Jesus *is* God in human flesh and without him I have no hope. Oh, God! Help! Save me! Forgive me! Jesus, you are my only hope. If you had not died in my place and endured the Father’s wrath, I most certainly would. Forgive me for being so utterly blind to your beauty until now. Oh, sweet Son of God! I embrace you alone. I want to live wholly and utterly for you.”

Jerry struggled to explain to himself what was happening. All he knew was that while listening to what he had heard so many times before, he “hears” it for the very first time. What he had read in the Bible so many times before, he “sees” as if it had only then appeared. Jesus of Nazareth, who until now held no attraction for him, suddenly seems altogether lovely and winsome. The conviction that this Jesus alone can deliver him from the spiritual turmoil, grief and guilt in which he is mired grips his heart. His soul is, as it were, flooded with wave upon wave of peace and joy as he feels the burden of his sin lifted from his shoulders and placed upon Christ, in whom it vanished from sight.

Ed, by the way, couldn’t help but notice that his brother was weeping. With a quick jab of his elbow in Jerry’s side, he whispered: “Cut that out! You’re embarrassing me.” But Jerry was unfazed. What Jerry now finds altogether lovely, Ed continues to loathe. Jerry’s unbelief disappears under a flood of repentance and whole-souled love for Christ. By an act of his will, Jerry embraces the redemptive sufferings of Jesus as his only hope and haven. He willingly repudiates sin and reliance on self, and with joy reposes in Christ. But Ed remains obstinate, and now even more indignant, in his unbelief.

Needless to say, Jerry’s experience that morning made for a volatile conversation in the car on the way home. He tried to explain to his brother what had happened, but Ed was incredulous and filled with rage. They were so engrossed in conversation that neither of them saw the pickup truck jump the median into their lane. The crash was head on and fatal for both. Instantly, Jerry left this life and entered the bliss of

eternal joy in the presence of the Savior whom he had embraced only minutes before in saving faith. Tragically, Ed faced the eternal opposite, separation from the glorious presence of the Lord Jesus Christ and an object, not of love and favor, but of righteous wrath and indignation.

***What accounts for the irrevocable and eternal division between these earthly brothers? What made Jerry to differ from Ed?*** Why did one come to heartfelt and happy faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior while the other persisted in heartfelt hatred and disdain? That is the question the doctrine of divine election is designed to answer. In the final analysis, when all is said and done, one must attribute Jerry's faith either to Jerry or to God or to some form of cooperative effort on the part of both in which neither takes precedence (or praise) over the other.

Neither of these young men, left to themselves, had any desire for Christ or the blessings offered in the gospel. If neither comes to Christ it is not because they want to but are not numbered among the elect or are told that, notwithstanding their desire, God will not let them. If neither comes to Christ it is because they want nothing at all to do with Jesus or anything of a spiritual character. They delight in their unbelief, even if they conduct themselves in what we might call a civil and humane manner. There is nothing in Christ that appeals to them; nothing in his person that might lure their hearts from sin to salvation.

So I'll ask yet again: ***“What made Jerry and Ed to differ?”*** The *Arminian* insists that what made Jerry and Ed to differ was Jerry. The ultimate and only sufficient reason Jerry believed and Ed did not is that Jerry exercised his own free will. Because God foreknew from eternity past that Jerry would believe and Ed would not, he elected Jerry to be an heir of eternal life, leaving Ed to his rightful recompense.

The *Calvinist*, on the other hand, knowing that, because of the total moral depravity of *both* Jerry and Ed, *neither* brother would believe, finds the reason for the difference between them in *God* and his unconditional, sovereign grace. Both Jerry and Ed desired and therefore deserved to be left to their sin and its inevitable outcome, eternal death. But for a reason hidden deep within his heart, God loved Jerry with an everlasting love and made a gift to him of both faith and repentance.

Although Jerry is the one who exercises faith and repentance, God is the ultimate cause. Jerry willed to believe, but only after and because God provided him with the power. Thus, Jerry's repentance from sin and his faith in Christ are portrayed as gifts because they flow from God's sovereign grace. Jerry did not earn them or obtain them by fulfilling some condition.

In summary, both Jerry and Ed were spiritually dead in their trespasses and sin. Neither man had a claim on divine favor, nor did either want it. Both men were deserving of eternal damnation. But Jerry came to life, whereas Ed did not. Why? Just as Lazarus rose up and went forth from his grave because God infused him with physical life and breath, so Jerry was infused with a new principle of spiritual life by which he rose up and came to Christ in faith and repentance.

*Both Calvinists and Arminians Believe in Divine Election*

Everyone who believes in the Bible believes in predestination and election. The issue isn't whether you have a doctrine of election but what kind of doctrine you have. The verb "to choose/elect" is used 22x in the NT, 7 of which refer to election to salvation or eternal life. The noun "elect" also occurs 22x, 17 of which refer to men and women chosen or elected to eternal life. The noun "election" occurs 7x, all with reference to salvation. The verb "to predestine" occurs 6x, 4 of which refer to men being predestined to salvation (cf. Eph. 1:5, 11). It's not my goal in this message to address the nature of election but rather to observe the unbreakable and eternal chain of God's saving purpose for us in Christ. I say it is "eternal" because it spans eternity past into eternity future. It starts with divine foreknowledge before the foundation of the world and consummates in glorification in the age to come.

### *The First Link: Foreknowledge*

The first link in this eternal chain of salvation is **foreknowledge**. We all agree that God is omniscient. He knows everything. But "foreknowledge" here in Romans 8:29 cannot refer to God's exhaustive knowledge in advance of all men and women because he clearly says that "those whom he foreknew he **also** predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." Unless you are prepared to affirm universalism, the idea that all mankind will be saved, you must affirm that foreknowledge is not the same as omniscience.

Based on the use of this language in both OT and NT, my understanding is that the verb "to know" refers to something far more than mere mental or intellectual understanding. It cannot be restricted to having knowledge in advance of some particular event. Rather, it is used as a virtual synonym for "love." It means to set one's affection upon or to highly regard or to delight in someone with peculiar interest. [The verb "to foreknow" occurs five times in the NT (Acts 26:5; Rom. 8:29; 11:2; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Peter 3:17). The noun "foreknowledge" occurs in two texts (Acts 2:23; 1 Peter 1:2).]

You may recall the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:23 where he reveals his future response to false disciples at the last judgment: "I never knew you, depart from Me." Needless to say, Jesus obviously "knew" who these men were and what they had done. In fact, it is precisely his knowledge of their motivation and intentions that leads him to pronounce this word of condemnation. So, when Jesus says "I never knew you" he means I've never been in a covenantal, saving, intimate relationship with you.

We see much the same thing in Amos 3:2. There the prophet quotes God himself who says of Israel:

"You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."

But God obviously "knows" or has cognitive awareness of all the nations of the earth. He is not ignorant of any of them. Clearly, then, to "know" in this case (as also in Genesis 18:19; Exodus 33:17; Jeremiah 1:5; Hosea 13:5), is more than simply to be aware of someone or something. It refers to a knowledge that entails covenant commitment and love and a relationship of intimacy.

Thus, *to foreknow is to forelove*. We see this in Romans 11:2 where Paul mentions God's eternal, covenant love for Israel. To have foreknown them is to have foreloved them:

“God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew” (Rom. 11:2a).

So, Paul isn't merely saying that God thought about you in eternity past but that he loved you before the worlds were formed! That God “fore”-knew us is but another way of saying that he set his gracious and merciful regard upon us, that he knew us from eternity past with a sovereign and distinguishing delight. God's foreknowledge is an active, creative work of divine love. It is not bare pre-vision or knowing something in advance of it occurring. God's foreknowledge does not merely recognize a difference between men who believe and men who do not believe. God's foreknowledge creates that difference! To be “foreknown” by God in this sense is similar to what Paul said in 2 Timothy and John in the book of Revelation:

“(9) [God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9).

“(8) And all who dwell on earth will worship it [the Beast], everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (Rev.13:8; cf. 17:8).

### *The Second Link: Predestination*

The second link in this eternal chain of salvation is *predestination*. Predestination is not synonymous with foreknowledge. Foreknowledge focuses attention on the distinguishing love of God whereby people are elected. Predestination points to the decision God made of what he intended to do with those whom he foreknew (see Acts 4:28). Predestination is that act in eternity past in which God ordained or decreed that those on whom he had set his saving love would inherit eternal life. There are six texts in the NT where this verb is used. Two of them are here in Romans 8:29-30. The other four are these:

“(27) for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, (28) to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 4:27-28).

“(7) But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory” (1 Corinthians 2:7).

“(3) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, (4) even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love (5) he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of

his will, (6) to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:3-6).

“(11) In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, (12) so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:11-12).

So, predestination refers to an action taken by God before the world existed. It points to his eternal, pre-temporal decree of what he would bring to pass in time, in history. See also, John 10:14-16,24-30; Acts 13:44-48; 2 Thess. 2:13.

Its ultimate purpose was the establishment of God’s spiritual family, his adopted sons and daughters in union with the Son of God, Jesus Christ. God foreknew us and predestined us to become like Jesus, spiritually, morally, and physically. This is what it means “to be conformed” to his “image” (v. 29b). “The term ‘firstborn’ . . . refers to Christ’s status both as the first human being released from bondage to decay (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-23) and the first in importance among God’s children” (Frank Thielman, 411). That to be the “firstborn” refers to preeminence of status is clear from Psalm 89:27 and Colossians 1:15, 18.

### *The Third Link: Calling*

The third link in the eternal chain of salvation is **calling**. This is not merely an invitation to come to Christ. This is far more than evangelism. This “calling” is the powerful work of the Holy Spirit by which he effectively secures a response in the sinner’s heart. We know this because **all who are called are also justified**. Paul doesn’t say that all are called but only some of them are justified. He says that “those whom he called he also justified” (v. 30). If you are called, you will be justified.

As Jerry and Ed sat week after week listening to the proclamation of the gospel, God was calling or inviting both of them to come to Christ in faith and repentance. After a time in which both spurn the offer, one of them responds. Clearly, then, there are two senses in which the word “called” is used in the NT. Consider Matthew 22:14 - “For many are called, but few are chosen.” May I take the liberty of rephrasing this text in order to make application to our example: “For Jerry and Ed were both called, but only Jerry was chosen.”

Whereas everyone, including Ed, is called by God **externally** in that the gospel is preached to all, only the elect are called by God **internally** in that they alone are enabled to respond in saving faith. No one deserves to be called. The internal calling is entirely an act of God’s sovereign and gracious mercy toward hell-deserving sinners. **He is not obligated to call any. That he calls some is purely an act of grace.**

We see much the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 1:5, where Paul declares that his gospel came to the Thessalonians “not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” Conceivably then, the gospel may indeed come to many in word only, that is to say, externally. They hear it with the ear but there is no response of faith in the heart. To others, the elect (among whom is Jerry), the

gospel comes not only in word but also in such a way that the Holy Spirit powerfully and efficaciously produces a saving response.

Although the Bible does not use the word “external” or “internal” with reference to a call of God, the fact that God issues an invitation which is universal, yet ultimately ineffective, justifies our use of the words. The external call may therefore be defined as the presentation of the gospel and offer of salvation to all sinners. This call or invitation to come to Christ to receive the forgiveness of sins is indiscriminate, which is to say it is not restricted to any one group, age, class, or nation. The external call, therefore, is simply the command of God that all men everywhere should repent and believe in order that they might be saved. Anyone can respond to this call, if only they will (see Matt. 11:28; Luke 24:47; Acts 17:30; Rev. 22:17). This call, because it is external only, may be resisted and refused (see Acts 7:51; John 16:7-11).

The “internal” call, on the other hand, may be defined as that summons by which God not only invites a person externally in the gospel, but also by means of the Holy Spirit internally enables him/her to respond to it. Thus the internal call is, in a sense, the external call with an added dimension. Attendant with the spoken word of the gospel is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit which irresistibly secures a positive, saving response from the one called.

What I am saying is that although both Jerry and Ed heard the call of God in the gospel, and although neither deserved anything but judgment, only Jerry was given “spiritual ears” in order that he might make sense of it. Whereas both Jerry and Ed thought about what they heard in the gospel, only Jerry was given insight and understanding in order that he might recognize its truth. That Jerry heard, saw, understood, and finally believed the gospel of Jesus Christ is owing ultimately not to Jerry and his free will, but to the sovereign grace of almighty God.

This internal call by which Jerry was drawn to faith is an *effectual* call. In other words, it goes beyond simply presenting the truth of Christianity to the mind; it actually and always issues in a positive response of the mind. ***The internal call, because it comes only to the elect, is designed to secure, infallibly and effectively, the saving response which the external call alone could not.***

Although the internal call which comes only to the elect is ultimately efficacious, it is *not* always *immediately* efficacious. Many of the elect hear the external call of the gospel for years and resist the summons in persistent, callous unbelief (even as Jerry did). But eventually, if they are elect, in God's appointed time they will believe.

***God is under no obligation to “call” anyone to faith in Jesus Christ. That God should call anyone is due entirely to grace, his unmerited favor.*** Whomever and however many he calls are themselves deserving of nothing but eternal death. He does not call men and women because of anything in them, any distinctive traits or accomplishments. Consider 1 Corinthians 1:9 where we read that “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). In Romans 1:6-7, Paul refers to “you who are called” and says that this was that you might “belong to Jesus Christ.” He then addresses this epistle to “all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.”

Those who are “called” are the ones God has predestined, and the ones he predestined are the ones he foreknew. Clearly this does not refer to all people. It refers to the elect of God. The “calling” that Paul describes in v. 30 is not an invitation that human beings can reject. It is the sort of invitation or calling that “overcomes human resistance and effectually persuades them to say yes to God. This definition of ‘calling’ is evident from Rom. 8:30,” where Paul “fuses the called and justified together so that those who have experienced calling have also inevitably received the blessing of justification” (Schreiner, 450-51). We also saw in Romans 8:28 that it is only “for those who are called according to his purpose” that can be assured that God is working all things together for their good. Therefore, this “call” creates what it commands.

So, once again, the external call of the gospel is what we typically refer to as evangelism. It is the appeal from God, through us, that people repent of their sin and turn to faith in Jesus. But the internal call of the gospel, which is what I believe Paul is talking about in Romans 8, is the work of the Spirit in the heart of God’s elect by which he sovereignly and supernaturally opens their eyes to see the beauty and glory of Jesus and transforms their hearts so that they will come to Jesus in saving faith.

How, then, do people come to faith in Jesus and get justified and saved? The answer is by means of this divine, sovereign call of God. Look at how Paul describes this in 2 Corinthians 4.

“(4) In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (5) For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. (6) For God, who said, ‘Let shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4-6).

We proclaim the gospel indiscriminately and universally to all people, male and female, young and old. But they are blind to the truth of the gospel, until God shines into their hearts the light that reveals who Jesus is and what he has done. In order for anyone to be saved, God must supernaturally call them and give them the light of the knowledge of the glory of God as revealed in Jesus.

#### *The Fourth Link: Justification*

The fourth link in the eternal chain of salvation is **justification**. It isn’t necessary to spend time in explaining this, as we’ve spent considerable effort in earlier portions of Romans clarifying what it means. Justification is the legal declaration by God that the righteousness of his Son, Jesus Christ, has been imputed to us or reckoned to us so that we stand in his presence fully accepted and fully forgiven by faith and faith alone.

#### *The Fifth Link: Glorification*

The fifth and final link in the eternal chain of salvation is **glorification**. We talked about this at great length when we examined Romans 8:18-25. But note here the use of the past tense in describing glorification. This may seem strange insofar as glorification is still future. Paul clearly wants to



emphasize the fact that our glorification is so sure, so securely set and sealed in the mind and purpose and predestined plan of God that it may be spoken of as having already occurred.

*Conclusion:*

*The Unbreakable Chain of Salvation, from Eternity Past into Eternity Future*

Note well that ***each link in this eternal chain of salvation is co-extensive with every other link.*** The objects of God's saving activity are the same from start to finish. ***Those whom*** he foreknew, not one more nor one less, ***these*** also he predestined. Whom did he predestine? Those whom he foreknew. And ***those whom*** he predestined, not one more nor one less, ***these*** he also called. Whom did he call? Those whom he predestined. And ***those whom*** he called, not one more nor one less, ***these*** he also justified. Whom does God justify? Those whom he called. And ***those whom*** he justified, not one more nor one less, ***these*** he also glorified. Whom does he glorify? Those whom he justified. There is a continuity in the recipients of salvation from divine foreknowledge in eternity past all the way through glorification in eternity future.

The same point can be made with even greater clarity by asking of Paul a series of questions that starts with the end and works back to the beginning:

Q: "Who is finally and fully glorified and will stand before God transformed and forever made like Jesus?"

A: "All those who were justified."

Q: "But who are those who are justified?"

A: "All those who were called."

Q: "O.K., then, who are those who were called?"

A: "All those whom God predestined."

Q: "One more question Paul: Who has been predestined?"

A: "All those whom he foreknew!"

So, how many did God lose in the process? Not one! All whom he foreknew in eternity past will ultimately be glorified in eternity future. Not one is lost. Not one! No one who is foreknown fails to be predestined. And no one who is predestined fails to be called. And no one who is called fails to be justified. And no one who is justified fails to be glorified!

There is immense practical benefit in this truth. Vv. 29-30 are designed to provide the basis or foundation for the promise of v. 28. In other words, we can know with confidence that God truly will work in all things for our ultimate good (v. 28) because those whom he calls according to his purpose will most assuredly be glorified as well (vv. 29-30). Thus, God will permit nothing ultimately to hinder his eternal good purpose for his called ones.

Finally, I would remind us all, myself included, that:

The issue is not whether people on either side of this debate act in a civil or, conversely, unloving manner toward those with whom they disagree. The issue is what does the Bible say.

The issue is not whether people on either side of the issue are dogmatic and inflexible. The issue is what does the Bible say.

The issue is not what you and I were taught growing up. The issue is what does the Bible say.

The issue is not whether or not any of us can decipher the mystery of the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom. The issue is what does the Bible say.

The issue is not what feels right or fair or just to you and me. The issue is not what makes us feel comfortable. The issue is not what we wish were true. The issue is what does the Bible say.